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ABSTRACT

Recently there has been a growing concern about the decline in academic achievement among students as modern schools have moved to more non-academic functions. William Torrey Harris was an early education reformer whose ideas are now proving relevant to the problems currently facing education. Harris entered the field of education in the 1850s when the curriculum for the early years of schooling was limited to the "three R's" with mathematics and classical languages added later. The belief was that the purpose of school was to foster the development of reason and that required imparting universal ideas and principles. Harris became a member of the influential Committee of Ten in 1893. The Committee was responsible for the inclusion of modern subjects in the high school curriculum. Harris believed the wisdom of Western civilization was divided into five branches: (1) arithmetic and mathematics, (2) geography, (3) history, (4) grammar, and (5) English literature. Harris felt that the purpose of schooling was to foster the development of reason and to impart universal ideas and principles instead of isolated, unrelated facts. He became president of the National Education Association in 1875, and was United States Commissioner of Education from 1889-1906. Harris was a founder of "The Journal of Speculative Philosophy," the most important U.S. philosophy publication of its time. (NL)

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WILLIAM TORREY HARRIS AND THE ACADEMIC SCHOOL

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by

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There is currently much discussion about American students' lack of academic knowledge and the concomitant need for greater academic rigor in the schools. Almost forgotten today, however, is one of the giants of nineteenth century American education who developed one of the most extensive philosophical rationales for the academic nature of the school--William Torrey Harris.

Harris was born on a farm in North Killington, Connecticut in 1835. After attending the local public schools and a number of private academies, he entered Yale in 1854 but left during the middle of his junior year, dissatisfied with what he considered the dry formalism of the studies.[1] In 1857, he went west to St. Louis to seek his fortune. Unable to make a living in private business, Harris soon became a teacher in the public schools. He rose rapidly in the educational ranks, ultimately serving as superintendent of St. Louis schools from 1868 to 1880. As superintendent, Harris gained the national spotlight for his educational reforms--the first public kindergarten in the United States, co-education in the upper grades--and even more so for his voluminous writings.[2]

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[1]Yale focused on the classical languages and mathematics, which was then the standard curriculum for higher education. Harris sought broader learning.

[2]The major biography of Harris is Kurt F. Leidecker, Yankee Teacher: The Life of William Torrey Harris (New York: The Philosophic Library, 1946).

Harris joined the newly-formed National Education Association in 1870 and until his death in 1909 was one of its most prominent members. He served as president in 1875 and participated on many of its most important committees. Harris was a member of both the Committee of Ten and the Committee of Fifteen in the 1890s, which shaped high school and elementary school curricula respectively. Harris came to dominate the NEA. "He used to control the decisions of the Association year after year," recalled William Lowe Bryan, President of the University of Indiana. "When he said 'thumbs up' on any proposal, it was adopted. When he said 'thumbs down,' that idea was dead. . . . They always thought that he must be right whether they understood what he was saying or not."[3]

Harris' career in education reached its zenith between 1889 and 1906 when he served as U.S. Commissioner of Education, the foremost education post in the federal government.[4] This position provided him the ideal platform from which to popularize his educational views.

Concurrent with Harris' rise in education was his development as a philosopher. Interested in transcendentalism as a youth, Harris fell in with a group of German immigrant intellectuals upon his arrival in St. Louis and was introduced to

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[3]Quoted in Leidecker, 322-23.

[4]The U.S. Commissioner of Education headed the U.S. Bureau of Education which was then part of the U.S. Department of the Interior.

the idealist philosophy of Hegel. This group gained world renown as the St. Louis Movement, and Harris remained a devoted disciple of Hegel for the rest of his life. In 1867, Harris helped to found The Journal of Speculative Philosophy, which he would edit until 1893. The Journal became the most influential American philosophy publication of its time.

In his writings, Harris placed education within a firm philosophical framework. With Hegel, Harris viewed existing society to be the highest manifestation of the world spirit or "Logos." In contrast to Rousseau's image of the noble savage, Harris held that man in his "natural" state outside the bounds of society was not free "because he is the slave of changing passions."[5] Only a rational being, a being who could shape its own nature, could be truly free, and for man this status was attainable only through social institutions. It was essential for the individual to "subordinate himself as a particular person, and make himself a servant of universal ideas such as he finds already formulated in society and the state, in Art, Religion, and Science."[6]

It was education that uplifted the individual to this higher level of humanity. "Education is the process of adoption of the social order in place of one's animal caprice. . . . It is the

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[5]Twentieth Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the St. Louis Public Schools for the Year Ending August 1, 1874 (St. Louis: Democrat Litho. and Printing Co., 1875), 41.

[6]William T. Harris, The Theory of Education (Syracuse, N.Y.: C.W. Burdeen Publisher, 1893), 29.

adoption of a consistent course of action instead of a self-contradictory one, and hence it is a renunciation of the moment for the freedom that has the form of eternity."[7] Education, however, in Harris' view, was not the sole preserve of the school. Each of what Harris regarded as the cardinal institutions of society--church, state, family, civil society--provided its own particular form of education. The specific role of the school was to supplement the family in integrating the child into society and its common body of ideas. Its type of education, however, was substantially different from that of the family. The family's training developed "unconscious habit and ungrounded prejudice or inclination." Harris did not belittle the formation of such unreflective attitudes, which he regarded as necessary for the viability of any society, but school transcended this in its effort to promote rational understanding. The school "lays all its stress on producing a consciousness of the grounds and reasons for things."[8]

To Harris, "The question of the course of study is the most important the educator can have before him."[9] The course of

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[7]William T. Harris, Psychological Foundations of Education: An Attempt to Show the Genesis of the Faculties of the Mind (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1898), 282.

[8]William T. Harris, "The Curriculum for Secondary Schools," Education, 14 (June 1894), 586-87.

[9]William T. Harris, "Equivalents in a Liberal Course of Study: Formal and Substantial Studies," Proceedings of the Department of Superintendence of the National Educational Association, 1880, 174.

study could be deduced "quite easily from the idea of the school as an instrumentality designed to connect the child as a new individual with his race, and enable him to participate in civilization."[10] To Harris, the function of the school was to transmit the cultural heritage of the West.

Harris held that the accumulated wisdom of Western civilization divided into five distinct branches, which he called "the five windows of the soul." The first window was arithmetic and mathematics which provided knowledge of the abstract relationships that govern the physical world. Next was geography which in the form of physical geography included the natural sciences. History, the third window, revealed the evolution of human society. The fourth window was grammar, the logical structure of language, which provided a model for understanding the nature of thinking itself. Finally, English literature, the fifth window, presented the sentiments and opinions of a people.

Harris believed that an understanding of society's intellectual heritage would enhance the individual's adjustment to existing society. But this meant adjustment to the broad Western society which could not suppress individualism because it was the embodiment of the concept of individual freedom. Moreover, such adjustment did not mean conformity to local group or community mores, which the student already identified with at

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[10]William T. Harris, "The Curriculum for Secondary Schools," Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1892-1893, Vol. 2 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1895), 1459.

the instinctive level. On the contrary, the study of Western civilization necessarily entailed a broadening of vision. It removed the student from his overly familiar, immediate environment and placed him in a much more expansive one, where he could look back upon his world with greater clarity of vision. It enabled the student to rationally analyze his own society and the developments that were part of its making. And by understanding society, the student would gain an understanding of self, which had been shaped by society. The school thus enabled the student to advance from the instinctive to the self-conscious level. "When the scholar learns his presuppositions and sees the evolution afar off of the elements that have come down to him and entered his being--elements that form his life and make the conditions which surround him and furnish the instrumentalities which he must wield--then he begins to know how much his being involves, and in the consciousness of this he begins to be somebody in real earnest."[11] To know oneself, therefore, was to know oneself as a member of a larger social whole, not as an isolated being.

The purpose of the school, Harris believed, was to foster the development of reason in its highest sense. This entailed the imparting of universal ideas and principles instead of numerous isolated and unrelated facts. Such deep understanding,

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[11]William T. Harris, "Educational Values," Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1893-1894, Vol. 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1896), 626.

however, was more the province of secondary and, even more so, higher education than the elementary school, which placed its emphasis on authority, drill, and memorization. Harris held that to attempt to move on to higher forms of learning before mastering the essentials of knowledge could be harmful. "There is this danger in the system of education by insight, if begun too early, that the individual tends to become so self-conceited with what he considers knowledge gotten by his own personal thought and research, that he drifts toward empty agnosticism with the casting overboard of all authority."[12] This did not mean that those who stopped their schooling at the elementary level could not advance to higher knowledge. For Harris emphasized that the elementary school provided the tools of learning to enable the individual to progress in knowledge through self-education. Harris viewed the self-educated individual to be the American ideal.[13]

Harris' course of study differed substantially from what had been the status quo in the 1850s when he first entered the education profession. This traditional curriculum was limited in terms of content, focusing on the "3 R's" in the early years of school and the classical languages and mathematics later on. It was predicated on the then prevailing theory of mind development.

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[12]William T. Harris, "Lectures on the Philosophy of Education," Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, Eleventh Series (Baltimore, 1893), 271.

[13]Harris was an ardent believer in the value of the newspaper and the public library for self-education.

The mind was thought to be analogous to a muscle, which could be strengthened by mental exercise. Mental power developed in one area, it was believed, could be transferred to another. What counted, therefore, was the rigor of the subject matter, not the content. The school, therefore, taught only those few subjects deemed most rigorous. And the classics and mathematics were traditionally regarded to be the most rigorous subjects. Even as the modern academic subjects--history, science, English literature--became established in American schools in the second half of the nineteenth century, the mental discipline theory was still providing the philosophical justification. Thus, the Report of the Committee of Ten in 1893 justified the inclusion of the modern subjects in high school curriculum on the grounds that they were equal to the classics in developing the mind. (Harris was a member of this famous committee, but the report was largely written by Charles Eliot, President of Harvard.)

While not completely rejecting the idea that mental power could be developed through use, Harris was more interested in the content of the subject. Harris did not seek a sweeping overhaul of the existing school curriculum; rather, the course of study he advocated was generally what prevailed in the schools by the latter part of the nineteenth century. He realized, however, that mental discipline was not an adequate theoretical defense. Many possible subjects were mentally rigorous--such as studying the languages of primitive peoples--which were not appropriate for the schools. The understanding of Western civilization

required not just the development of mental power per se, but an understanding of the intellectual content of Western culture. Harris believed that this was already the unarticulated reason for the existing curriculum.

While Harris' course of study reflected the actual practice of American schools in the latter part of the 19th century, there were numerous criticisms of the existing order, which Harris found it necessary to address. Many of these educational reformers maintained that the presentation of separate subjects was artificial and that all information should be integrated around a broad topic.[14] Harris, however, held that each branch of knowledge had something distinct to offer and that efforts at integration invariably slighted some of them.

Another reformist critique, widely implemented in the twentieth century, was that the school should offer more practical courses. During Harris' time the primary emphasis was on the inclusion of manual and vocational training in the school. Harris stood opposed to this, although he acknowledged that modern civilization rested on productive industry and that manual

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[14]The major educational group advocating this view in the 1890s was the Herbartians. Although in theory based on the educational thinking of the German philosopher Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841), individuals of somewhat divergent opinions comprised the movement. Herbartians addressed many aspects of education, but fundamental to their thinking was that the traditional subjects should be amalgamated (the Herbartian term was"concentrated") around a central theme. This was directly opposed to Harris' "five windows of the soul" concept, and caused the Herbartians to vehemently attack his 1895 Report on the Correlation of Studies for the Committee of Fifteen concerning the curriculum of the elementary school.

and vocational education provided preparation for productive industry.[15] Harris simply believed that these forms of education should be primarily the concern of institutions other than the school.[16] Moreover, Harris maintained that "If youth can be taught to bring their powers to bear on such subjects as arithmetic, grammar, history, literature, they certainly can with ease give their mind to any form of manual training or the work of external observation, because the greater includes the less, and the studies of pure science are far more difficult to carry on than studies in applied science."[17]

One cardinal point of those reformers who sought to make the school more practical was the elimination of Latin and Greek, the alleged "dead languages" of little value in the modern world. In contrast, Harris supported the study of the classical languages because of the insight this provided on Western civilization. Greece and Rome represented the embryology of Western civilization and "one has to study his own civilization in its

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[15]Harris was a firm supporter of modern industrial society . He held that the improved material condition of mankind resulting from industrialization allowed for greater spiritual development.

[16]Harris was willing to accepted these subjects into the school to a limited extent.

[17]William T. Harris, "Vocation Versus Culture," Sixty-second Annual Meeting of the American Institute of Instruction. Lectures, Discussions and Proceedings. 1891. Boston: American Institute of Instruction, 1891, p. 16.

embryology in order to understand it."[18] It was not enough to study the history of antiquity or read the literature in translation. For it was in language, Harris firmly believed, that the spirit of a people was revealed. "We must don the garb in which they thought and spoke, in order to realize in ourselves these embryonic states of our civilization."[19]

Another group of reformers sought to determine the school curriculum from the nature of the child's interests and capacities, rather than from society's existing knowledge. These were the advocates of "child-centered" education, who took a rather Rousellian view of the child's nature. This approach meant an atmosphere of play and a de-emphasis on academics. Harris, however, held that "The child begins life a savage, ignorant of education. . . . He has to learn the view of the world which the civilization has attained."[20] This involved training of the will as well as of the intellect. It was necessary for the school to change the child's nature so that it would acquire "the habits of acting according to the broad forms

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[18]William T. Harris, "Formal Discipline," in Proceedings of the Department of Superintendence of the National Educational Association, 1901, 146.

[19]William T. Harris, On the Function of the Study of Latin and Greek in Education (Boston, 1884), 12.

[20]"Vocation vs. Culture," 2.

and conventionalities of rational existence."[21] Such a process entailed effort and work by the student. External discipline was essential, although it had to be kept within limits. The purpose of discipline was to develop in the child the habit of correct action. As the child matured, it would gradually understand the reason for this discipline. The child would "gradually come to see that rules of order are based on deep underlying reasons, and are not the arbitrary will of the teacher, but the necessity of the school itself as a social institution."[22]

This process of the individual transcending natural inclinations, Harris called "self-estrangement." External discipline in childhood would pave the way for the self-disciplined adult. The latter would be a self-active, rational individual who could exercise true freedom in terms of his own civilization.

While in his later years Harris was critical of innovations in the curriculum along the lines of what became known as progressive education, this attitude did not mean he absolutized the existing school curriculum or that he rejected the proposed innovations in their entirety. In fact, he generally acknowledged beneficial elements in these reforms. Harris opposed reforms because of their extremism--that they rejected

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[21]William T. Harris, "Prescription--Its Province in Education," Papers Read Before the American Institute of Instruction, July 26, 1871 (Boston: American Institute of Instruction, 1872), 128.

[22]"Vocation vs. Culture," 6.

the accumulated wisdom of the past which he considered the essence of education. Within Harris' Hegelian framework, the reforms fitted into the dialectic of history, representing the antithesis in conflict with thesis. Ultimately, a higher synthesis would evolve from this conflict, with the few good elements offered by the reforms beings added to the great storehouse of past wisdom. "The progress of education is in a zigzag line, from extreme to extreme. This appears throughout all history. But were it not that succeeding times profit by the experience of their forerunners, the progress would not be assured."[23]

Despite Harris' opposition, the progressive educational reforms gained ascendancy in the twentieth century. As the American school of the twentieth-century was loaded down with more and more non-academic functions, the amount of time and effort devoted to academics ineluctably diminished. The past decade witnessed extensive public concern about the decline in academic achievement among American students. As a consequence, there has been a renewed emphasis on the academic nature of the school. One leading proponent of academic excellence writes: "The function for which the school is uniquely responsible is the development of the child's mind. If children do not learn mathematics or science or history or a foreign language in school

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[23]William T. Harris, "Herbart and Pestalozzi Compared," Educational Review, 5 (May 1893), 417.

they probably never will."[24] Given this now-prevailing attitude, it would seem that William Torrey Harris still has something to offer America.

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[24]Diane Ravitch, The Schools We Deserve: Reflections on the Educational Crises of Our Times (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1985), 24.